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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the Los Angeles Unified School District's experiences with charter schools, this brief highlights the difficulties in balancing the twin needs of charter-school autonomy and accountability, and their implications for the way in which charter schools and districts can work together. It identifies key challenges in district-school relationships and outlines some ways in which districts and charters can work with each other more effectively. It is hoped that the examples provided by a large urban district have relevance for other developing charter schools and the districts that sponsor them. The text discusses the parameters of the district/charter-school relationship, detailing the types of charter schools that various states allow. The document describes the challenges in the district-school relationship, such as finding the balance between autonomy and accountability and administering, supporting, and communicating with charter schools. It explains how districts can work better with charter schools and how they can plan for the different needs of conversions and start-ups, and explores charter-school sponsorship as well as the need to set clear expectations for charter approval and renewal. The importance of establishing a liaison between school and district and encouraging and supporting interaction between charter and other schools is likewise presented. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Creating Working Partnerships

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How Can School Districts and Charter Schools Work Together Effectively?

August 31, 1999

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WestEd

Improving Education through Research, Development and Service

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Creating Working Partnerships: How Can School Districts and Charter Schools Work Together Effectively?

by JoAnn Izu
with the editorial assistance of David Ruenzel

August 31, 1999

Creating Working Partnerships

How Can School Districts and Charter Schools Work Together Effectively?

Charter schools have proliferated across the nation over the last few years, rapidly becoming an accepted part of public education systems. Since the first experiments were launched in Minnesota in 1991, 36 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school laws (as of July 1999). In 1998 alone, five states passed charter laws and about 473 new schools opened during the 1998-99 school year. Nationwide, more than 1,200 schools are in operation.

Once considered a radical innovation, charter schools are becoming permanent features of many school districts. For example, in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's second largest district serving roughly 12% of California's K-12 student population, charter schools have become a part of the education mainstream. Beginning in Fall 1998, the district has required all of its schools to choose a reform strategy, and becoming a charter school is one of five designated pathways to reform that district schools can select.

Using WestEd's evaluation of 13 charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) as a research base (see textbox on page 2), this brief draws on LAUSD's experiences implementing and supporting charter schools to highlight the difficulties balancing the twin needs of charter school autonomy and accountability, and their implications for the ways in which charter schools and districts can work together. First, we identify key challenges in district-school relationships, particularly when districts are also the sponsoring agency. Then, we outline some ways in which districts and charters can work with each other more effectively. Though charter schools differ significantly from state to state and the impact of charter schools on districts was not the primary focus of our study, we think these lessons from the experiences of a large urban district have relevance for other developing charter schools and the districts that sponsor (or are considering sponsoring) them. With the number of charter schools steadily increasing – e.g., in LAUSD the number of charter schools has more than doubled (from 15 to 34) in the last year – learning what charter schools and stronger school-district relationships have to offer to the larger school system is of paramount importance.

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Improving education through research, development, and service

The Context: About the Evaluation

[illegible] which became [illegible] second state to pass charter school legislation in 1992, is home to 158 charter schools (as of February 1999). State law requires the sponsoring agency to determine whether schools nearing the end of their term should have their charters renewed. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), California's largest district with 668 schools and a highly diverse student population, was one of the first to grant schools charter status, and consequently, among the first to renew school charters.

The district contracted WestEd to conduct an evaluation of 13 of the district's operating charter schools (ten elementary, one middle, two high schools), with an emphasis on the five "up for renewal" schools - i.e., schools whose charter terms were nearing an end. The five-month evaluation, conducted in the first half of Spring 1998 was designed to provide one piece of information that could be brought to bear on the Board's June 1998 renewal decisions. (Other pieces included the revised charter, public testimony, and a school's self-assessment report on whether its charter goals had been met.)

Overview: Parameters of the District-Charter School Relationship

Since the inception of the charter school movement, advocates have hoped that charter schools would not only improve teaching and learning within their schools, but that the schools, as putative models of innovation, would also drive reforms in the wider public school system. At this early juncture, the picture is mixed. Recent research (Rofes, 1998; Wells, 1998), suggests that charter schools generally have only a minimal impact on other schools and the district. In our work, we did see some changes in LAUSD – for example, the district now recognizes charter schools as a reform strategy that district schools can choose. Furthermore, the district is moving toward per pupil budgeting for all schools.

Generally, charter schools are public schools that are granted autonomy from certain regulations in exchange for accountability for results. Each school's charter – a contract between a state or sponsoring agency – sets out what it plans to do to reach certain educational goals and outcomes within a specified period of time. In exchange for either blanket exemptions from most state codes and district regulations, or waiver of requirements on a one-by-one basis, charter schools are held accountable for improving student performance and meeting the terms of their charter, sometimes called a "performance contract".

Yet while charter schools across the country share these characteristics, it is important to note that charter schools differ dramatically across the country – differences that depend upon a state's authorizing legislation and the sponsoring agency – which, as the National Study of Charter Schools notes, "may have profound implications for how *systemic* change may – or may not – result from chartering" (pg 9). Authorizing legislation varies significantly from state to state in the nature and extent of the autonomy they allow charter schools, the conditions of accountability and renewal, and even the type of sponsoring agencies as well as the kinds of charter schools permitted (see figure 1). Depending upon the legislation, the charter granting entity or "sponsor" can range from a local school board or institution of higher education to a state department of education or an independent governing board specially created for charter schools. Different sponsoring agencies within a state may also have different expectations and requirements. For example, while some districts that sponsor charter schools may require charter schools to adhere to district standards or curriculum, other districts may not. In short, charter schools do not represent a single, unified model of reform.

Moreover, it isn't clear yet what new models of schooling work best for particular student populations. Charter schools in pioneer states are just beginning to reach the end of their terms, and many states and sponsoring agencies have neither had accountability systems in place over the duration of the term of their charter schools nor monitored the progress of charter schools closely. This has made it difficult to assess the performance of students or the benefits of particular "innovations". Even determining what innovative practices are, as a recent study of charter schools suggests and our own work has also concluded, is

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often "best appraised in context"[1]:

"Where progressivism reigns as local orthodoxy, a back-to-basics school signifies innovation – and vice versa. Where traditional age-grading is the norm, multi-age grouping appears revolutionary – and vice-versa."

Figure 1: Types of Charter Schools Various States Allow[2]

34
States that have passed charter school legislation allow pre-existing public schools to convert to charter status (AKA public school conversions)
31
States also allow newly created, start-up charter schools (AKA start-ups)
Of the 34, only
9
States allow pre-existing private schools to convert to charter status (AKA private school conversions)

Challenges in the District-School Relationship

In our evaluation of charter schools in Los Angeles (see textbox on page 4), two major challenges in the relationships between districts and charter schools emerged: 1) a basic dilemma regarding the degree of autonomy and accountability for charter schools that operate outside many normal regulations and policies, and 2) managing relationships with charter schools within a large, bureaucratic, complex system.

Finding the Balance Between Autonomy and Accountability

Perhaps the most important challenge for districts (and other agencies) that sponsor charter schools is simply to define an appropriate relationship. In addressing issues of autonomy, districts must sometimes balance their desire to have charter schools meet certain district requirements such as district goals, curriculum or fiscal procedures with the desire schools may have to explore new approaches in these areas. This is not always easy to do. Our research found that some district staff feel that all schools should be held accountable for implementing district standards and curriculum. One theory is that this may result in charter schools looking more like other district schools, working against the central goal of having charters explore alternative, "break the mold" approaches to teaching and learning. A high school in LAUSD that is applying for charter status illustrates this point well. Wanting to serve students who have traditionally not done well in school, the founders have proposed a curriculum that is quite different from the district's curriculum for high school students. Some district staff believe that in order to be considered a full-fledged high school the school should have a curriculum that looks like that of other schools. Others believe that the district has not been successful with this particular population of students, and that the charter school should, therefore, be given the opportunity to try a novel approach to the curriculum.

Because state laws are sometimes vague, determining how much and what type of autonomy charter schools should have is often up to the sponsor and the charter school. In LAUSD, the degree of charter school autonomy depends, in part, on the degree of fiscal independence they negotiate (see figure 2 on page 5). Schools must balance greater freedom in decision-making against increased responsibility not only for

The Context: About LAUSD

LAUSD's charter schools are diverse in terms of size, structure, and the degree of flexibility allowed. Student enrollments in elementary charter schools range from a low of 142 students to two schools with more than 1,000. Similarly, enrollments in secondary schools range from a small, alternative high school with 62 students to a comprehensive high school with 2,480 students. Of the charter schools evaluated, three are considered "fiscally independent" - exempt from most fiscal, personnel, operational and other district policies. The remaining ten schools are "fiscally dependent" - subject to district policies as they remain largely within the district operational structure; however, they may request waivers as needed. Eight of the dependent charter schools (five elementary, one middle and two high schools) share an umbrella charter and an overarching governance structure.

managing, but also for raising, the financial resources necessary to operate their schools. Small schools – whether conversion or start-ups – often face economy of scale issues. In particular, small public school conversions with highly experienced (and as a result, more expensive) staff that also serve predominately higher socio-economic, English-speaking students may not receive additional categorical funding or other fiscal resources such as foundation funding. Sometimes operating under severe financial constraints, these small conversion schools may be compelled to depend heavily upon the very district from which they have sought independence and, therefore, may not attain the level of autonomy sought by the charter school.

A related challenge that districts like LAUSD might face is clarifying, and in some cases determining, the criteria and process by which schools they sponsor will be held accountable. This is particularly difficult to do when state legislation is unclear regarding the issue of charter renewal. In California, the initial legislation specified broad criteria for revoking a charter, yet left renewal to the discretion of sponsors. (In recent amendments, this has been clarified.) Consistent with findings from the California state study of charter schools regarding districts' roles in holding charter schools accountable, our evaluation found that LAUSD did not have clear criteria or guidelines for renewing charter schools that had reached the end of their term. Similarly, with the exception of one school, neither schools nor the district had established a process for revising charter goals and outcomes in light of the mid-course corrections and changes that often took place.

Managing Relationships: Administering, Supporting and Communicating with Charter Schools

Charter schools, as well as districts, need to realize that administering and supporting charter schools is not a cost-free reform. Districts have to balance their time and resources between public and charter schools. Providing the specialized assistance and associated administrative costs can sometimes take its toll on relationships. In LAUSD, for example, the district established a committee comprising roughly 25 representatives from various departments who meet about twice a month for an hour or two to discuss issues related to charter schools. In addition, unlike most other district schools, charter schools have more frequent contact with the central office and often have direct access to the heads of particular departments. The extra time and assistance given to charter schools can create resentments among some other schools in the district as well as among some district staff who view charter schools as receiving special treatment.

At the same time, there is also the question of what kind of support districts should provide to charter schools, particularly in areas these schools are required (either by the state or sponsoring agency) to address. Special education is a good example. Newly created schools that have limited experience and capacity to deal with this highly regulated, complicated area might find they must rely on the district (as well as other resources) to

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help them understand and comply with federal regulations.

Finally, in large districts, establishing clear expectations for charter schools and providing timely, unambiguous answers to questions about regulations or waiver requests can be a challenge, largely on account of the number of different departments and persons that may be involved in addressing a particular concern. In LAUSD, for instance, the constant turnover in district personnel and the representatives who sit on the district committee that deals with charter school matters has led to inconsistent directives and counsel provided by different district departments. Another problem is that district representatives can bring individual as well as departmental perspectives on charter schools to the table. As a result, it is often difficult to develop a unified district viewpoint on issues.

How Districts Can Work Better With Charter Schools

A major goal charter advocates have had, one that is often reflected in language regarding legislative intent, is that the charter school movement's influence be systematic (systemic) – i.e., that the reforms occurring within charters have a broader impact on the district and its other schools. This can only occur if districts strengthen their relationship with charter schools and enhance their own capacity to learn more systematically about what does and does not work. In LAUSD, both the district and the schools agree that a charter school's demonstrated success in uncertain or risky areas can often "help open the door for other schools" which have also been requesting more autonomy in that area. For example, per pupil budgeting – considered by some as a fiscal risk – was initially attempted by fiscally independent charter schools in the district, and is now the superintendent's goal for all schools over the next three years. Similarly, based on the success of charter schools, LAUSD now allows any school to contract out maintenance and operation services that are under a thousand dollars directly, without going through the district.

Yet the ways in which the district learns from charters has so far followed a more or less uncharted course rather than being a deliberately planned effort. Some of the ways in which districts can enhance their learning and strengthen relationships with schools are cited on the following page.

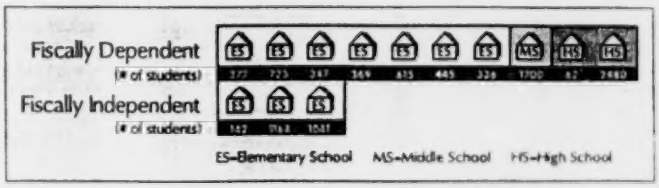
Plan for the Different Needs of Conversions and Start-ups

How a district establishes and maintains relationships with charter schools depends in part upon the type of charter school with which the district is working. For example, in our study we found that public school conversions and start-up charter schools often present different issues for districts.

Districts working with public school conversions find themselves in the position of having to redefine a pre-existing relationship. In the LAUSD example, the schools and district found that it's often harder to redefine an old relationship than to establish a new one. With conversions, there is a long history sometimes characterized by wariness. Start-up charter schools, on the other hand, typically have little if any history dealing with the district and, therefore, have an opportunity to forge a new kind of relationship.

Charter schools, as well as Districts, need to realize that administering and supporting charter schools is not a cost-free reform.

Figure 2: Dependent and Independent Schools in LAUSD[3]



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While public schools converting to charter status often have their curriculum and instructional programs in place, they must also quickly develop the financial structures and entrepreneurial skills needed to deal with business management and fund raising. This can be extremely challenging, especially when the school may be bringing on new staff while simultaneously trying to implement a new instructional program.

In contrast to conversion schools that are already operating and can adapt their curriculum, newly created charter schools must literally start everything up at more or less the same time: typically, a new staff is faced with introducing a new curriculum in a new facility to new groups of students. Implementation is made even more complex by the small size of most start-up charter schools (see figure 3 on page 7).

Newly created charter schools often require more assistance and support because of their lack of familiarity with district resources and procedures, and/or applicable federal and state laws. Whereas most conversion schools already have a facility, for instance, newly created schools must initially focus on locating and finding the financing for an appropriate space. In California, with strict laws regarding the structural soundness of buildings in the event of earthquakes, this is not an easy or inexpensive task.

Set Clear Expectations for Charter Approval and Renewal

A key lesson revealed by our evaluation is that when districts are sponsoring agencies (see textbox), they should set clear criteria and a process not just for renewal, but for approval of charters, *at the outset*. Being clear about the criteria and process for approving charter petitions can help establish good relationships with schools from the start. When expectations are consistent, widely known, and mutually agreed upon, schools are more likely to see them as fair and have fewer anxieties about how decisions are being made.

In renewal decisions, people often forget that both an assessment of a school's past performance as well as approval of a new petition for the next term of their charter come into play. Whether a school lived up to the terms of its contract is just one piece of renewal. The other piece may involve a revised petition – the goals and activities slated for the next term – which in fact constitutes a new charter and is subject to an approval process. In short, simply meeting the terms of one's old charter doesn't automatically guarantee that a school's charter will be renewed.

Consistent with the findings from recent statewide evaluations of charter schools in California and Wisconsin, we found in our own work that LAUSD neither had a written policy nor clear guidelines in place regarding renewal prior to the start of our evaluation. This lack of clarity about the guidelines for renewal caused some schools to feel confusion and heightened anxiety about the renewal process. This came at a time when schools had just completed writing a new petition for the next five-year term. A lack of clear expectations and criteria set up front not only makes schools apprehensive, it also makes it difficult for districts to evaluate a charter school's performance and authorize renewal.

Types of Charter School Sponsorship

Though the need for clear criteria and a process for the approval and renewal of charters is one key finding of our evaluation of charter schools in LAUSD, it is important to understand that not all districts sponsor charter schools. According to a recent national study (RPP, 1999), authorizing legislation varies tremendously from state to state regarding the number and types of agencies that are allowed to grant - i.e., approve - charters. For example, of the 34 states (including the district of Columbia) which had passed charter school legislation by the 1998 legislative session, 15 states permit only local boards to grant charters. In contrast, seven states permit only the state board (and in one of these states, it's the state commissioner) to grant charters. In two states, both the local and state board must approve a charter, while in the remaining ten states multiple agencies are able to grant charters.

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Greater clarity about what charter schools plan to accomplish, and how progress will be measured when mid-course changes or corrections are made, would also help define the terms of accountability. In our experience, districts need to consider what happens if some targets (e.g., goals in a charter or required standards) are met and not others, or if testing procedures should change mid-stream, affecting how performance can be realistically assessed. By thinking about contingencies, sponsoring agencies can help ensure that a renewal process is not only fair, but also helpful to schools.

This clarity can be achieved in several ways. Fenton Avenue Charter School, for instance, has included in its new charter a provision that the district set terms of renewal within six months of approving its second five year charter. And the district coordinator of charter schools, aiming for greater consistency in setting out expectations, is having each department outline what it looks for in a charter petition so that this information can be conveyed to schools in advance.

Establish a Liaison Between School and District

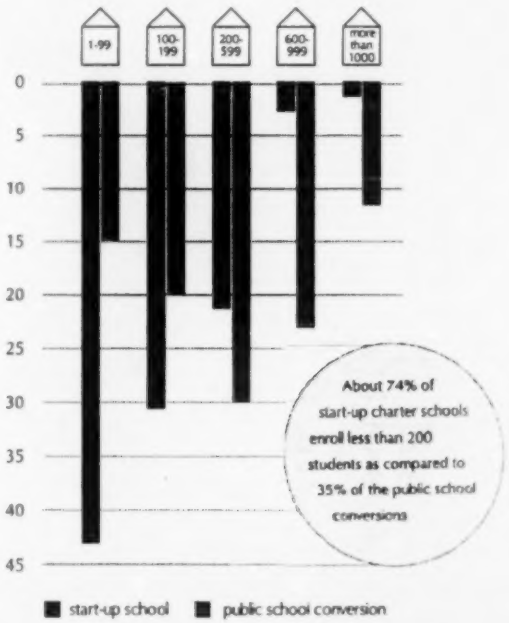
Having a district liaison for charter schools who is knowledgeable about charter schools as well as the district can help streamline communication between the two. Formation of a committee comprising representatives from various divisions has been LAUSD's chief strategy for coordinating charter school issues and needs. In large districts, such a mechanism is probably necessary to ensure a good flow of information and greater efficiency in dealing with school requests. In addition, LAUSD has a district coordinator who serves as a liaison; with established relationships to various departments, the coordinator can assist schools by quickly shepherding school needs and requests through the district. Charter school representatives can also serve as liaisons; it has been suggested that better communication can be achieved by having charter school representatives sit on the district committee. Because the district coordinator and charter school operators are familiar with the practical realities and issues that surround charters, both strategies could also help the district understand how lessons learned from charters can be applied to other district schools.

Encourage and Support Interaction Between Charter and Other Schools

Charter (and non-charter schools) need opportunities to learn from one another about practices that have resulted in improved teaching and student learning. In LAUSD, fiscally dependent charter schools are required, and fiscally independent charter schools encouraged, to participate in activities organized by their geographic cluster of schools (sometimes called a "complex" – consisting of a high school and its feeder schools) about such matters as professional development. Also, some charter schools

In short, simply meeting the terms of one's old charter doesn't automatically guarantee that a school's charter will be renewed.

Figure 3: Size of Start-up vs. Conversion Charter Schools[4]



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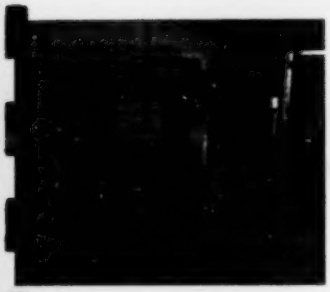
Photos from LAUSD Charter Schools



have initiated activities that encouraged and supported interaction about "best practices." Open Charter School, for instance, started "Institute" days where teachers share successful curricular and instructional strategies with other teachers from schools (charter and non-charter) within, as well as outside of, the district. In our study, the Palisades Charter Complex was formed to provide greater consistency, i.e., articulated curriculum, resource sharing, schedule and event coordination, and continuity of educational vision across all schools within the complex. Representatives from schools in the Palisades Charter Complex routinely meet in content-specific, cross-level groupings. Participants say that such meetings have resulted in greater continuity in curriculum, better professional development, and greater cooperation between teachers at different schools and grade levels. Even in situations where a complex is not comprised entirely of charter schools, individual charter schools working with feeder schools in their district – for example, an elementary charter school working with non-charter middle schools – may find interaction mutually beneficial since students from one are likely to attend the other in later years. If districts want to systematically gather information on best practices emerging from charter schools, districts should provide incentives and structures that will help charters meet more regularly with other schools.

Identify Strategies to Assess and Monitor Innovative Approaches

Not all innovations occurring within charter schools are destined for success. The district needs to develop strategies that will help it analyze and determine just which innovations are worth recreating. At the onset of a charter petition approval, the district might consider what it could learn from the new school, as in our example of a new curriculum developed for a particular group of high school students whose needs have not been well served in the past. In this way, the approval process becomes a way of "testing" new, "break the mold" approaches. The district may want to pay particular attention to this alternative curriculum, or in other cases a new staffing arrangement or instructional schedule. By being clear at the onset about the opportunities to learn from charters, districts can then set up structures to monitor the ways in which charter schools are reaching or failing to reach their goals. Districts can also set up ongoing discussions between district and charter school staffs around educational reforms that might benefit all schools.

Help Charter Schools Align their Performance Goals with External Accountability

States and local districts are increasingly adopting results-oriented accountability systems based, in large part, on test scores. Many states are putting in place a three-part accountability system: the establishment of **standards** coupled with a system of **assessments** designed to measure student progress toward meeting those standards, followed by incentives and/or consequences tied to the results. (This is in contrast to past decades, during which school accountability largely meant complying with a set of rules and processes delineated and monitored by the state.)

Charter petitions lay the foundation for a different kind of accountability by specifying the standards (i.e., performance objectives) the individual school hopes to achieve and the assessments that will be used to measure progress toward these standards. But these

assessments, while matched to the charter's educational approach and philosophy, may not necessarily be aligned to the accountability systems and assessments that districts are developing. Unless noted in authorizing legislation or the charter petition, schools may not in fact be required to align with these district frameworks.

Tension occurs when charter schools do not choose of their own accord to follow the same standards as districts. While forcing alignment may be counter to the intent of many charter school laws, exploring ways to better align individual charter school performance goals with new accountability systems is crucial, if one hopes to compare the results of different approaches to educating students. In LAUSD, strategies that create some dialogue around accountability issues have been employed. For example, the five charters up for renewal provided input on the research issues and questions for the external evaluation of their schools funded by the district. And the district coordinator for charter schools has recommended that school representatives be placed on the district charter school committee which could also advance discussions of accountability.

One comprehensive strategy for aligning standards and accountability at the individual school level with standards and the need for external accountability at the district level is the public engagement processes used by the Kyosei project, part of WestEd's Western Assessment Collaborative (WAC). The project features "accountability dialogues" in which school and district partners work together to discuss student performance and how to improve it. The goal is to find the common ground between two groups: "those who require assessment information that provides a large-scale picture of the performance of the system and those who need richer, more contextualized information to guide instruction"[5]

How Charter Schools Can Work Better With Districts

Charters wanting to take full advantage of a district's resources must work patiently and forthrightly with the district. They must realize that while the district may want to assist, it has many other concerns and schools to which it must attend.

Realize that a Completed Petition is only the Beginning of the Approval Process

For many schools, drafting a charter petition is a time-consuming task, involving numerous meetings, several drafts and layers of review by prospective staff, parents, community members and, even, funders. From the school's perspective, submitting it to the sponsor is the end of a long cycle of hard work. Yet in many districts that sponsor charter schools, particularly in large urban ones such as Los Angeles Unified, various divisions – special education, curriculum and instruction and finance and accounting to name but a few – must review petitions for compliance with federal and state regulations, or collective bargaining agreements that may still apply and possibly set precedents for future agreements. · Petitions are also reviewed with respect to certain district policies. For example, though not the case in Los Angeles, some districts review proposals in terms of their adherence to district standards or curriculum. Changes are often requested before a proposal is approved and passed on to the next level. School board members – who ultimately approve the petition – may have still more questions and revisions.

Realizing that the process of approving (and renewing) a charter takes time, and preparing school staff and supporters for possible revisions, can take the surprise (and resentment) out of having to do additional work. In short, managing expectations about the work ahead and planning timelines that allow time for revisions and

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Tension occurs when charter schools do not choose of their own accord to follow the same standards as districts.

negotiations can lay the foundation for a better working relationship with the district.

Acknowledge the Need for External Accountability

While many of those who start a charter school, especially newly created start-ups, do so to realize an alternative educational vision or approach, they must still acknowledge the district's external accountability requirements. In order to assess charter schools as a strategy for reform, districts need comparative information over time. Districts without state assessments will most likely want to administer standardized tests.

Charter schools, then, must balance the desire to follow one's own educational approach with the district's need for external accountability. For example, at Open School in LAUSD, a former magnet school with a strong child-centered, teacher-developed curriculum, staff are conscious of state and district standards and attempt to embed them within their instruction. At the same time, they feel standardized tests run counter to their goals – i.e., teachers don't want to lose sight of their child-centered approach that's focused on experiential learning. So while the school continues to administer the standardized tests other district schools use, staff are simultaneously developing their own performance-based assessments. In short, charter schools need to be aware and responsive to the multiple levels of accountability that the district and state may require.

Develop a Strong Accountability Plan Early

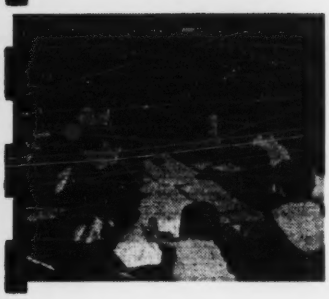
Some of the schools up for renewal say they wish they had put a strong accountability plan in place from "day one." This would have helped ensure a less traumatic and time-consuming renewal process. In our study of LAUSD charter schools, schools mentioned a need for clear criteria for renewal from the district. But they also acknowledged that they learned a great deal in five years about establishing measurable goals (and needing to revise many of their original ones). Charters not only need clear goals at the outset, but also need a process in place for periodically reviewing progress toward those goals. Major changes in staff, location or student composition are some of the things that can change a school's goals and the ways of assessing them.

Build Productive Relationships with other Charter District Schools

As noted earlier, charter schools can learn from one another's experience. Throughout Los Angeles County, charter school administrators informally met about once a month to discuss specific issues and offer support. More experienced charter schools provided other schools that were considering a conversion to charter status with advice and suggestions on ways to proceed. Now, a formal networking team of charter schools administrators and staff from Ventura, Los Angeles and Orange Counties meet bi-monthly as part of a statewide organization's – California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC) – efforts to link charter schools in the state. (Currently, nine such networks exist throughout California.)

As indicated earlier, charter schools can also benefit from working with other district schools such as their feeder schools. Indeed, such sharing can extend their influence. For example, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center (a charter school) has offered teachers in neighboring schools the opportunity to participate in some of the professional development activities they hold on their site.

More photos from LAUSD Charter Schools



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Take Advantage of District Resources

In part, many parents and some staff are attracted to charter schools because of dissatisfaction with their former public schools. At the same time, founders need to remember that districts can be good sources of information and expertise on a variety of issues. This is particularly important to start-up charter schools that tend to be smaller in size, with fewer staff who often have major responsibilities apart from classroom teaching. In such schools, one of the major challenges for staff is to learn and master new areas of responsibility while simultaneously juggling all of the tasks that go along with teaching a new curriculum to a new group of students. Turning to the district as a quick source of information rather than mounting a new search by oneself makes sense. Our research uncovered at least one school in LAUSD that viewed the district as a valuable source for information and assistance on a variety of issues, ranging from teacher professional development opportunities to special education laws and strategies. Charters might also want to consider taking advantage of a district's size. For example, charter schools may be able to cut costs by purchasing some high-volume supplies from the district.

Summary – Challenges Abound, But So Do Opportunities

Clearly, districts and charter schools face many challenges — challenges that are likely to mount as charters become, as the National Study of Charter Schools puts it, "an accepted part of the landscape of public education." More than two-thirds of the states now have charter legislation, and this budding enthusiasm for charters may very well be accompanied by trepidation on the part of districts long accustomed to having full control of their schools.

On the other hand, trying to work through these concerns – by building productive relationships and opportunities for dialogue – is considered essential by both charter schools and district staff in LAUSD. In our work, both charter schools and the District see some real benefits of charter schools (see figure 4). And the growth in charters experimenting with new approaches can help districts and educators learn more about what works well for certain students and their communities. By breaking down old barriers, setting clear goals and expectations, and creating more opportunities for critical dialogue around such issues as professional development and accountability, charter schools and districts have an opportunity to transform the educational landscape.

Figure 4: Lessons Learned About the Benefits and Drawbacks of Charter Schools

SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE
DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE
BENEFITS
DRAWBACKS
Ability to set and stay an independent programmatic course
Expenditure decisions made and executed quickly
Strong internal accountability and more unified school culture
More and different opportunities for leadership
Provide educational options for teachers as well as parents/students
Open door in risky, uncertain areas for other schools
Opportunity for schools to try alternatives
Opportunity to learn what works, what doesn't
Steep learning curve on "business" side for public school conversions
Must establish small business infrastructure and educational program simultaneously
Some schools must balance school educational direction with district priorities or state mandates
Increased time demands for staff, possibility of burn out
Staff must balance new duties with time for the professional development needed to make coherent changes in curriculum and instructional
"Magnifying lens" stress
Administrative costs
Difficulty upholding consistent expectations
Lack of internal capacity to monitor progress for R&D
Balance accountability pressures with the granting of permission to break the mold
Loss of revenue
Increasing legal questions and issues

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Endnotes

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2 Data taken from RPP International's, *A National Study of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report (1999)*, pg. 12.

3 Data taken from WestEd's, *The Findings and Implications of Increased Flexibility and Accountability: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District, Cross-Site Report (1998)*, pg. 8.

4 Data taken from RPP International's, *A National Study of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report (1999)*, pg. 21.

5 Jamentz, Kate, "Authentic Accountability", *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, Volume 27, Number 4, January 1998, pg. 38.

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WestEd's Resources on the Web

Visit the US Charter School's website at www.uscharterschools.org.

Visit WestEd's Policy Program's hot topic page dedicated to charter schools at www.wested.org/policy/.

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